

Context and Contact: the impact of a Japanese international university environment on Japanese use outside the classroom

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of a Japanese international university environment on Japanese language use outside the classroom. The Language Contact Profile (LCP), was utilized to measure language contact and use outside the classroom, and information was gathered related to the nature and quality of the language use in order to determine how much contact with Japanese and target language use participants in this type of study abroad program engage in, with whom the participants speak Japanese with, for what purposes they use Japanese, and to determine if the Japanese international university environment is facilitating language use outside the classroom. The findings resulted in a high degree of diversity in total amounts of target language contact and use outside of the classroom, resulting in no single or pair of contact experiences among participants that could be defined as typical. The environment does seem to facilitate language use outside the classroom, but many participants reported a lack of understanding of how to best utilize the environment to maximize target language use and development outside the classroom.

Key terms: Japanese international universities, Language Contact Profile, study abroad programs

1. Introduction

What environment is the most beneficial for second language acquisition (SLA)? In what ways does the environment influence language use and language contact? The learning environment context, either in the traditional language classroom, a domestic immersion program or in a study abroad program, has been the focus of research in SLA since the 1970's. The importance of contextual factors in SLA research began with Hymes (1974) when his research included the roles of setting, purpose and participants in communicative exchanges. Study abroad programs are often assumed by students and laypeople to be the best environments for SLA (Segalowitz & Freed, 2004) solely because of greater opportunity for contact with native speakers and the target language, but availability of contact with native speakers alone does not guarantee that students will utilize the opportunities available to them and use the target language (TL).

Determining the frequency and duration of language contact beyond the language learning classroom and determining the various purposes of target language use by L2 learners might reveal insights into the effect of a particular learning environment. The aim of this research is to discern the effect the environment has on students' contact with Japanese, the quantity of Japanese used by students outside the language classroom and for what purposes it is being used by students of Japanese studying at a Japanese international university, by measuring the amount of language contact students have with the target language and gathering information concerning the function and purpose of their use of the language.

2. Study Abroad Programs

Several previous studies examined the context of study abroad programs to date (Brecht, & Robinson, 1995; Freed, 1995; Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2002; Lafford, 2004; and others). A variety of target languages, such as French (Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004), Spanish (Lafford, 2004; Segalowitz, & Freed, 2004) and Japanese (Dewey, 2004) have been examined for various aspects of language production or acquisition, such as oral fluency (Freed, Segalowitz & Dewey, 2004; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004), communication strategies (Lafford, 2004), reading development (Dewey, 2004) and lexical development (Collentine, 2004) among others. The findings from the previous research have proved inconclusive as to the impact study abroad programs have on language

acquisition, possibly due to the varying characteristics of individual programs.

Are all study abroad programs alike? As mentioned previously, results from examining study abroad programs, concerning how the environment alone affects language development, have been mixed. Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998) found that students in a traditional language classroom environment demonstrated increased grammatical awareness, whereas students in study abroad programs demonstrated increased development in pragmatic awareness. Siegal (1995) found that the surroundings affected the acquisition of communicative competence of learners of Japanese in an overseas study program in Japan. The environment alone did not guarantee increased language acquisition simply due to being surrounded by the target language, and non-native speech by fellow participants in the program was found to interfere with target language production. Marriott (1995) found that the problems Australian learners of Japanese had in acquiring honorifics while studying in Japan were associated with a range of contextual issues such as insufficient L2 input, as most conversations were conducted in plain style, and higher status interlocutors tended to speak down to subordinates. Native speakers do not generally model honorific language, so students reported a lack of negative feedback, as culturally it is customary for native speakers of Japanese to refrain from criticizing learners so they will not 'lose face' due to complexities of the Japanese honorifics system compared to English and differences in styles. However, Niezgoda and Roever's (2001) findings demonstrated little or no effect in language acquisition resulting from the environment. Segalowitz & Freed (2004) revealed further evidence that the environment had little effect on language acquisition and that although the study abroad environment did have increased target language contact, it demonstrated little in additional production compared with regular language classroom students. International universities in Japan differ from other traditional study abroad programs as international students are segregated from domestic students for most or all of their classes, and with the exception of Japanese language courses they are taught only through the English medium. How this unique environment affects language contact and use, and how the students perceive the environment, as a contributing factor to language development is the focus of this research.

3. Research Questions

1. How much time are students spending outside the language classroom speaking Japanese?
2. With whom are the students speaking Japanese with outside of the language classroom?
3. For what purposes are students speaking Japanese outside of the language classroom?
4. Is the Japanese international university environment facilitating language use outside the language classroom?

4. Methodology

4.1 Japanese International Universities

Japanese international universities, for the purposes of this research, are defined as universities in Japan that are dual-language (English and Japanese) institutions where the student body is divided into two groups: English-base or Japanese-base, according to language proficiency. This research will focus on a group of English-base students. English-base students are primarily international students (non-Japanese nationals) that are either native speakers of English or have a prerequisite level of proficiency in English appropriate to the standards of the university. Most of the courses these English-base students attend are taught in English and they are required to study Japanese as a foreign or second language. English-base and Japanese-base students spend most of their class time segregated from each other, resulting in limited in-class language exchange. This environment is somewhat different from the standard study abroad program environment where visiting students are integrated into the general university population. For this reason, and because no previous studies examining this particular environment have been found, the researchers were interested in examining what impact this environment might have on the quality and quantity of target-language use outside the classroom. Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU) in Oita prefecture, Japan was selected as the Japanese international university to research.

4.2 Participants

Forty-one students studying Japanese as an L2 were recruited to participate in the study. Criteria for retaining students in the study

were the following: the participants were to be non-native speakers of Japanese and not Japanese nationals (English-base students); they had to have been at APU studying Japanese for at least 2 semesters (See table 1), thus allowing for variables concerning previous language contact in the environment as well as current language contact and uses in the environment; and they had to answer all questions in the questionnaire (no data was included from partially complete questionnaires). The participants were from a variety of countries (China – 8; Korea – 6; Thailand – 6; Vietnam – 4; Taiwan – 2; Indonesia – 1; Mongolia – 1; Singapore – 1; United States of America -1; country not disclosed – 11). Participants may have selected to not disclose their home country due to the fact that there are countries with only one student enrolled at APU, and therefore, disclosing this information would make them easily identifiable. This lack of personal information did not affect the outcomes of the study. Participants reported their most recent TOEFL scores in order to establish English competency to fully understand the questions included in this research (See table 2). Age and gender details were not included in the data because the researchers believed that potential participants from countries with few students enrolled at the university could be identified with such details and thus threaten the guarantee to keep their participation in the study anonymous.

Table 1

How many semesters have you attended APU?		Frequency	Percent
Valid	5 or more semesters	19	46.3
	2 semesters	2	4.9
	3 semesters	8	19.5
	4 semesters	12	29.3
	Total	41	100.0

Table 2

What is your most recent TOEFL Score?		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Less than 300	1	2.44
	350-399	1	2.44
	450-499	1	2.44
	500-549	8	19.51
	550 or Higher	20	48.78
	Native Speaker	10	24.39
	Total	41	100.00

4.3 The Language Contact Profile

Attempts to gain insights into various aspects of SLA – language use, contact with native speakers, language learning strategies and techniques, etc. – are key to research in SLA. Researchers have for decades formulated various questionnaires and interview approaches in their attempts to gain insight into the quantity and quality of target language use and contact, but few have ever

openly shared and encouraged the continued use and adaptation of their method to the same extent as the various researchers that have used and adapted the Language Contact Profile, “a multifaceted questionnaire that examines various aspects of a student’s language history and use” (Segalowitz & Freed, 2004 p. 179). First formulated by Seliger (1977), the Language Contact Profile is a questionnaire formulated to assess second language contact for students in language programs to reveal details of various learning contexts including study abroad programs. The questionnaire was adapted first by Bialystock in 1978 and then again by Day in 1985 and Spada in 1986. In 1990, Freed “refined and expanded what she came to call the Language Contact Profile (LCP) in her first project on the effects of language learning in a study abroad context” (Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz & Halter, 2004 p. 350).

This study incorporated an adjusted twenty-eight question LCP as the main instrument for collecting data. This version differs from the original questionnaire to include four open-ended, qualitative questions in order to ascertain more specific details related to target language use outside the language classroom, and to gain participants’ personal opinions and impressions of the international university as a learning environment. The current LCP does not include any items for qualitative data, so it was adjusted to include the necessary items to facilitate the aims of this research. Each language contact inquiry included a pair of questions that first requested participants to estimate the number of days per week they engaged in the L2 contact and then asked them to estimate the number of hours on those days reported that they engaged in the contact (See table 3). Selected items included in the version of the LCP used also asked participants to identify with whom they made the L2 contact or for what purposes the contact was made, in order to gain further insights into the purpose of the contact.

Table 3

11. On average, how many days per week did you spend speaking in Japanese, outside of class with non-classmates last semester?

0 (go	1 day	2 days	3 days	4 days	5 days	6 days	7 days
to #13)							

12. On those days, typically how many hours per day?

0-1	1-2	3-4	4-5	more
hours	hours	hours	hours	than 5
				hours

4.4 Data Analysis

All quantitative data was input into SPSS 13.0, quantitative data analysis software package for analysis. Total weekly contact hours were calculated by examining the twelve pairs of questions related to individual aspects of language contact. Each pair included a question asking how many days per week a participant engaged in the contact, followed by a question asking how many hours per day reported they engaged in the contact. The two findings were calculated to determine a total weekly number of hours for each aspect and then a final sum of the combined totals was calculated to determine the total weekly L2 contact. All remaining items were calculated for frequencies. All qualitative data was analyzed by first coding for initial categories and determining frequencies for each and then coded into further subcategories.

5. Findings

In order to determine the amounts of various kinds of contact and use of Japanese the participants reported, the six question pairs related to days per week and hours on those days each type of contact continued were calculated to determine the means and standard deviations. Included were time spent outside of class speaking Japanese with classmates (M=6.46 hours per week; SD=6.94); time spent speaking with non-classmates weekly (M=9.32 hours per week; SD=11.92); engaging in brief exchanges

(M=6.93 hours per week; SD=14.28); listening in on other people's conversations in Japanese (M=8.63 hours per week; SD=19.50); and time spent reading (M=5.59 hours per week; SD=12.37). The overall total time of contact with Japanese was then calculated (M=44.88 hours per week; SD=59.12).

The LCP includes questions concerning previous learning experiences with the target language and the target context, i.e. study abroad programs, and includes questions asking participants to self evaluate their current skills in the target language. Prior to starting the program at APU, two participants (2.4%) reported previously living in Japan for the purpose of studying Japanese, whereas the other participants had no prior living experience in Japan. 26.8% (N=11) reported previously living in another location where they were exposed to a language other than their native language for purposes of study. Responses for self-evaluation of current Japanese language ability varied greatly (See table 4). The results for how participants estimated how often they communicated with fluent speakers of Japanese during the year prior to answering the questionnaire were: 48.8% (N=20) communicated daily; 26.8% (N=11) communicated weekly; 17.1% (N=7) communicated monthly; 4.9% (N=2) communicated a few times a year; and 2.4% (N=1) reported never communicating with fluent speakers of Japanese.

Included were questions concerning with whom they spoke Japanese during the semester that they answered the questionnaire. Participants spoke in Japanese with instructors outside of class (36.6%; N=15); with friends that are native speakers of Japanese (53%; N=22); with Japanese classmates (63.4%; N=26); with strangers that they thought could speak Japanese (19.5%; N=8); with a host family if living with one (17.1%; N=7); and with service personnel (75.6%; N=31).

Table 4

How would you rate your ability with Japanese Listening?

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Poor	5	12.20
	Good	19	46.34
	Very Good	13	31.71
	Fluent	4	9.76
	Total	41	100.00

How would you rate your ability with Japanese Speaking?

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Poor	10	24.39
	Good	18	43.90
	Very Good	12	29.27
	Fluent	1	2.44
	Total	41	100.00

How would you rate your ability with Japanese Writing?

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Poor	18	43.90
	Good	16	39.02
	Very Good	5	12.20

Fluent	2	4.88
Total	41	100.00

How would you rate your ability with Japanese Reading?

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Poor	13	31.71
	Good	16	39.02
	Very Good	11	26.83
	Fluent	1	2.44
	Total	41	100.00

Questions related to participants' overall impression or opinions about their efforts to use Japanese, the program they were enrolled in, and what they thought the program should offer were included. Participants' replies concerning overall satisfaction with the amount of time and effort they put into using Japanese outside of the classroom were: 36.6% (N=15) responded that they were satisfied and 63.4% (N=26) replied that they were not satisfied. Twenty-five comments were collected concerning the reasons for their level of satisfaction. 64% (N=16) assumed the responsibility for their dissatisfaction; 12% (N=3) reported that problems with the environment contributed to their dissatisfaction; 12% (N=3) reported positive comments about their efforts; and 8% (N=2) provided comments that were ambivalent or provided no clear positive or negative opinion. Most participants (80.5%; N=33) had positive replies when asked if they think the university provides an environment that promotes using Japanese outside of the classroom on a daily basis, and the qualitative replies revealed specific reasons for these responses (See table 5). When asked to provide suggestions how the university could provide more opportunities to use Japanese on campus outside of class, three main categories emerged from the data. Suggested most was reducing or eliminating the policy of separating English-base and Japanese-base students on campus; participants commented that this separation hinders exchange between Japanese learners and native speakers resulting in many study abroad students mostly spending time with other study abroad students and not being more involved with native speakers. Students also reported they subdivided into groups on their own, often according to L1, and thus further reduced their opportunities to take advantage of using Japanese outside of class. Another category that emerged suggested the university hold more events with the surrounding community to increase participants' opportunities to forge more links with native Japanese speakers. Finally, some participants had complaint that the Japanese style of instruction was not conducive to a communicative classroom, so students did not feel they were competent enough to speak Japanese with confidence outside the classroom, especially when engaging with native speakers.

Table 5

Overall, do you think your university provides you with an environment that promotes using Japanese outside of class on a daily basis?

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Yes, definitely	11	26.83
	Yes, a little	22	53.66
	Not really	7	17.07
	Not at all	1	2.44

Total	41	100.00
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Qualitative Reply Examples

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| Positive: | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Well, I think APU helps students to get the survival level of Japanese in order to do the basic stuff like: shopping, ordering food 2. APU has a very special studying environment, composed of more than 50% of domestic Japanese students. Anyone can easily approach any Japanese not only the students but also the staff working on campus and use Japanese. 3. Most of the staffs in APU offices still use Japanese as their prior language, as well as in cafeteria and AP House |
| Negative: | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In APU they divide the subject in English basis and Japanese basis. Usually Gaijin only know Japanese through ECA/circle. But that doesn't really help that much either, as the content of conversation being spoken is different than daily life conversation. 2. We cannot really say APU promote the use of Japanese but foreign students are struggle speaking Japanese when contact Academic Office or other offices. 3. There's too much English every where, and English speaking people are all over the place, and Japanese students try to speak English to you. Plus, we all have lives and things to get done here...if English will help us get it done easier or more quickly, we're GOING to use English. |
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6. Discussion

The time participants in the program spend outside the language classroom speaking Japanese varies greatly in all aspects examined in this research. Students spend an average of 44.9 hours of total time per week outside the language classroom, but a standard deviation of 59.1 hours reveals there is no single typical student or experience. Three reported more than one hundred hours per week, and six reported less than ten hours. What were more surprising were the findings related to participants' estimations of how often they spoke Japanese with fluent speakers during the year prior to answering the questionnaire. It has already been mentioned that one student offered a valid reason of being in Korea for military service the year prior, but the fact remains that 24.4% (N=10) reported speaking Japanese no more than monthly, yet all participants were living in Japan at the time. However, when looking at the findings more closely, the average hours reported per day in productive, or active communication (i.e. speaking and not listening or reading) it is clear that most participants were engaging in conversations beyond simple greetings and negotiations for survival, so many participants are using Japanese actively and engaging in long conversations.

The findings were not very surprising concerning with whom the participants are speaking Japanese or for what purposes they speak Japanese. The group that students communicated with most frequently was service personnel, and this is not surprising because participants in a study abroad program need to take care of day-to-day necessities. It was surprising that 63.4% (N=15) did

not speak Japanese outside of class with their instructors, and may be due to the characteristic of the international university environment for widespread English use. The participants that did report speaking Japanese with instructors outside of class may only use Japanese for brief exchanges and greetings, but the current data does not reveal specific purposes for the exchanges. This widespread English use combined with the large number of non-native Japanese speakers on campus and the fact that the domestic Japanese students (Japanese-base) are also studying English could be the cause of so many participants reporting not speaking Japanese with native speakers on campus.

The Japanese international university does seem to be facilitating language use outside the classroom. Concerning this issue, 80.5% (N=33) responded positively concerning this issue. As mentioned previously, the environment does seem to have characteristics that could interfere with maximizing target language use outside the classroom though, and participants were not hesitant to share their ideas. Central to the suggestions were the basic structuring of the Japanese international university's segregation of students according to language proficiency. Many participants reported this being problematic, and the researchers tend to agree that keeping the native speaking Japanese students separated from the Japanese learners minimizes the benefits of the context of studying an L2 in a study abroad context. To spend all class time with only other L2 learners is no different from studying in a traditional language classroom. Students reported wanting additional activities and exchanges with the community organized through the university. The researchers believe the university assumes the participants will find and utilize target language use outside the classroom on their own, but if the policy is to separate the groups as they do and not provide guidance in accessing the community, many participants will fail to utilize this valuable language resource. What results is a lack of organization on both parties (students and university administrators). Students look to the administration to provide opportunities to exchange with the community and domestic students, and the administration may expect students to utilize the resource of the domestic students and community. This problem could be reduced by additional guidance from the administration to the students by providing opportunities and instruction to further engage with the native Japanese both on and off campus.

7. Conclusion

The Japanese international university experience cannot be easily defined or categorized as one or two types of experiences, and the impact of the environment greatly depends on the individual participant's own willingness to utilize the opportunities available to them and actively engage in target language contact. Participants are in regular contact with Japanese language outside of the classroom, but this is not surprising considering the participants are all living in Japan. This research only begins to scratch the surface of what effect this unique learning context has on second language acquisition.

This research was limited in a few ways. Firstly, the sample size was small, thus our findings' reliability may not be high. Conducting interviews rather than only including open-ended questions would have yielded more data, as the questionnaire did not provide the opportunity for follow-up questions, and though we attempted to qualify participants' English language ability to accurately understand all questions and provide accurate answers by including a question concerning TOEFL scores, it is possible that some questions may have been misunderstood by participants. With the large number of L1s spoken by participants it was not possible to offer translated versions of the questionnaire to accommodate all L1s. Finally, as discussed in previous studies, all study abroad programs are not alike, and thus programs at other Japanese international universities are likely to be different. If similar research is conducted at other Japanese international universities, is likely to yield different results.

As a result of this research, further study of the Japanese international university environment should be conducted. Comparing the Japanese international university context with the typical Japanese university context for study abroad programs could yield important results about how the population of a university, either separated or as one, contributes to Japanese language development. Only through continued research can we learn more about the impact of context and contact in second language acquisition in Japanese international universities and elsewhere.

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